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## Our lives are pieces in a pattern

van Duijn, H.W.

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# Summary

Our lives are pieces in a pattern. The Philosophies of Virginia Woolf and Carry van Bruggen in the Light of Modernism

A thorough comparative study of Virginia Woolf and her Dutch contemporary Carry van Bruggen has been lacking so far, even if their respective works contain sufficient leads for such an endeavour. The two writers developed literary strategies which were very similar, and both applied their methods with much psychological insight. One of their major commonalities is the use of the 'modernist' *stream of consciousness* technique, which triggers the reader to make a literary character's feelings and emotions their own. Second, both of them were deeply interested, not only in philosophical matters but in the relevance of their personal experiences as well.

The 1987 survey by Douwe Fokkema and Elrud Ibsch, *Modernist Conjectures: A Mainstream in European Literature 1910-1940* (originally published 1984 in Dutch) is very useful as a starting point for a comparative study. Fokkema & Ibsch outline the international modernist context of Woolf, Van Bruggen, and E. du Perron, together with canonical writers such as James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Thomas Mann, Marcel Proust, and Robert Musil. Fokkema & Ibsch's concept of modernism assigns a markedly intellectual and independent role to the narrator and the characters. They see the modernist writers as representing a literary movement marked by skepticism, experiment, and intellectual dispute, and in which narrators are wary of any super-individual, idealistic or metaphysical notions on man's destiny. Modernist writers, in their view, prefer mythology over autobiography in painting their characters and structuring their novels. Their works contain no absolute 'truths' or abstract ideals, just provisional hypotheses.

It remains to be seen, however, whether the modernist intellectual attitude thus described is compatible with Woolf's and Van Bruggen's philosophical interests. Their novels are marked by a keen desire to work personal experiences into philosophical notions, which clearly distinguishes their work from Joyce's or Eliot's. One of the questions to be answered in present study is whether Fokkema & Ibsch were in fact justified to include Woolf and Van Bruggen in their survey.

Chapter One focuses on Fokkema & Ibsch's argumentation; it shows how their theoretical account of modernism is at odds with the way in which Woolf and Van Bruggen reflected on their own work. Fokkema & Ibsch's approach is a structuralist-semiotic one, in which they hold that the work of modernist writers reflects societal problems and developments. They seek to establish a causal relationship between literary strategies on the one hand, and socio-historical circumstances – the extra-literary context – on the other.

Studying the novels by Woolf and Van Bruggen in their extra-literary context, particularly from a gender perspective, we have found that Fokkema & Ibsch, in this particular case, have in fact insufficiently taken into account the impact of social circumstances and philosophical notions on these two writers' works. *Modernist Conjectures* understates the importance of the gender perspective in Woolf's and Van Bruggen's self-representations as writers, in spite of the fact that their novels and essays have contributed significantly to the *discours féminin*.

The gender perspective taken by Woolf and Van Bruggen, together with their socio-economic situations and Van Bruggen's religious background, caused them to have certain preoccupations that mattered much less, if at all, to their male fellow-modernists. Van Bruggen would cite prejudice against women, and religious discrimination, to explain her sense of inferiority. In Woolf's work we notice an interplay between sex, class, and medical conditions, based on her own experience. Contrary to their male modernist contemporaries, in their novels Woolf and Van Bruggen employ female characters that

tend to be independent thinkers and gifted writers or artists. This is another indication of their desire to do away with conventional wisdom concerning the intellectual and artistic capacities of women.

In order to assess the modernist quality of Woolf's and Van Bruggen's works, and to investigate the connections between life, philosophy and literature found in their novels, we extended Fokkema & Ibsch's classification model to include an analysis of the extra-literary context. Central to this analysis are two questions. First, how do these writers' views on the world and on life relate to their sex, their parentage and other important factors such as Woolf's medical conditions and Van Bruggen's Jewish background? Second, how did the evolution of these views affect their literary work? To answer these questions we need to comparatively study Woolf's and Van Bruggen's biographies and views, and to find out how these elements are reflected in their novels.

The present study comprises three comparative parts. Part One deals with both writer's biographies; Part Two studies their philosophical interests and considerations; Part Three discusses their novels, *To the Lighthouse* and *Eva*. Each part contains three chapters, one on Woolf, the second on Van Bruggen, with the third making the comparison between them. Preceding the three parts is an Introduction on Woolf and Van Bruggen, together with a critique of Fokkema & Ibsch, *Modernist Conjectures*.

Part One highlights a number of ambivalences in the two writers' lives, resulting from the tension between contradictory impulses, such as – externally – their fathers' attitudes and conducts, illness, religion, social conventions, sexual taboos, and – internally – their longing for a role and an identity of their own, for individuality and cultural independence. No new biographical facts are put forward in these chapters, as they are just charting the factors that determined Woolf's and Van Bruggen's growth as writers.

Part Two discusses the philosophical issues that characterize Woolf's and Van Bruggen's work. It shows how their personal histories shaped their views. Each of them made a distinction between two modes of being, or two types of

individuals: the ‘dogmatist’, the *moi social* on the one hand, and the self-critical individualist, the *moi profond* on the other. To both of them, this distinction served as a tool for interpreting (power) relations between people and for putting in perspective the ambivalences of their own childhood and adult lives. In their analyses of the differences between the two types of individuals they drew on their personal experiences. Shaped by their intellectual (Woolf) and religious (Van Bruggen) family backgrounds, the two writers managed to reach unconventional opinions and points of view. The distinction between the two types of individuals also honed their understanding of identity – of how people relate to the tangible reality in which they live, to each other as individuals, and to their peers as a group.

Part Three, an analysis of Van Bruggen’s novel *Eva* and Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, focuses on the philosophical topics in their work. How do the novels reflect their experiences, their thinking, and particularly the concepts of the *moi social* and the *moi profond*? How do their characters position themselves vis-à-vis others? How do the authors articulate their own role as modernist narrators? The overall question in this part is, whether and how the two writers may have benefited from their lifelong scrutiny of the relations between themselves and the world in which they lived. The two novels feature topics such as the opposition between the *moi social*, ego-driven pillars of society on the one hand, and the *moi profond*, cohesion-seekers or ever-wavering individualists on the other. The main characters in both novels are deeply committed to their faith in a principle of unity, to a relation between their bodies and the world they live in, and to their recollections of the past. This enables them to develop a perspective on a natural ordering, an underlying coherence of everything, a perspective which imparts meaning to the ambiguity and contingency of concrete experiences.

Finally, an assessment is made of Woolf’s and Van Bruggen’s lives and works within the context of modernism. Were Fokkema & Ibsch justified in including them in their survey of modernist writers? As it turns out, Woolf and

Van Bruggen did adopt modernist literary techniques, pushing some of them even further than their contemporaries would go. However, their views were markedly at odds with modernism.

Rather than using modernist design principles in their novels, such as the authority of critical awareness, detached observation, myth, or linguistic experimentation, the two writers employ the dichotomy of the *moi social* and *moi profond*. They both had to overcome specific personal issues stemming from their respective socio-historical backgrounds and having to do with their fathers, their marriages, sexual experiences, and their being writers. Philosophy helped them make sense of these ambivalences on the one hand, and determine the shape and content of their novels on the other. Both writers were committed to a philosophical principle of unity to which modernist literary conventions, which they did apply, would be secondary. They did not lose themselves, as would their modernist contemporaries, in purely intellectual and literary play with words, images and myths, or in the breaking of sexual taboos. As it turns out, our analyses of these two writers' lives and views offer new perspectives on their novels, and may in addition prove to be a useful complement to the classification model by Fokkema & Ibsch.